

CHRIST'S TEACHING ON DIVORCE

October 8, 2003 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

The following is excerpted from the *Way of Life Advanced Bible Study Series* "The Four Gospels" --

Matthew 19:1-12

1. The Pharisees were asking Jesus about His interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4. There were two basic interpretations among the Jews in that day, that were led by two influential rabbis:
 - a. Shammai interpreted it to mean that divorce could be obtained only on the basis of immorality.
 - b. Hillel interpreted it to mean that a divorce could be obtained for any type of uncleanness. Therefore, divorce on this basis could be for almost any reason.
2. Jesus took them back to the first marriage as the pattern for God's will in marriage (vv. 4-6).
3. Jesus taught them that divorce was allowed because of the hardness of man's heart (v. 8). God's law of divorce arose out of His love for the injured party and His concern for godly order in society.
4. Jesus gave a strong doctrine of divorce, in saying that the only cause for divorce is fornication and any other cause is sinful (v. 9).
 - a. Fornication "is a general term including all forms of immorality, whether by single or married persons, and whether bisexual or homosexual" (Bruce Lackey). Compare 1 Thess. 4:3-5.
 - b. The disciples understood how strong this teaching is, because they replied that if such is the case, a man should not get married (v. 10).
5. Some apply this passage only to the espousal for marriage (compare Mat. 1:18-19, 24). They teach that there can be no divorce from an actual marriage, only from an espousal prior to the actual marriage. But the context is normal marriage (Mat. 19:3-7). Jesus uses the term "one flesh," which certainly applies only to an actual marriage.

6. Did Jesus allow for the remarriage of the divorced person if the divorce is because of fornication? In my estimation, there is room for a variety of positions on this matter, because the New Testament is not clear. I personally believe the exception clause modifies both the divorce and the remarriage, that God does allow for one narrow possibility of divorce and remarriage in the New Testament dispensation. The other major N.T. passage touching this subject is 1 Cor. 7:10-16.

- a. In 1 Cor. 7, Paul referred back to Christ's teaching and reaffirmed it (vv. 10-12).
- b. 1 Cor. 7 teaches that if a partner departs from a marriage for any cause other than abandonment, he or she should remain unmarried (v. 11).
- c. But in the case of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse, the one abandoned is "not under bondage" (v. 15). Again there are two common interpretations of this, and there are strong feelings on both sides of the issue.
 - (1) Some think this means the one who is abandoned is free to marry again.
 - (2) Others think that the one abandoned is free from the obligations of the marriage but not free to remarry.

7. Dr. Bruce Lackey took the position that in Mat. 19, "Christ allowed divorce, after marriage, for any form of immorality, and the innocent party is permitted to remarry without being guilty of adultery." He believed the "except" clause in Matt. 19:9 modifies the outcome *both* of the divorce and the remarriage.

8. Jesus seems to conclude the section on divorce by saying that His strong position cannot be received by everyone because of the weakness of human nature (see Mat. 19:11-12). Dr. Lackey made the following observation on this difficult subject:

"God permits what he does not always prefer. This is a principle throughout Scripture: Acts 13:18; Deut. 14:26; Prov. 20:1; 23:29; Rom. 14:21; Jam. 1:17. The latter passage teaches that God is unchangeable. What He once thought about strong drink, for example, He has always thought; the same is true with marriage, but He has permitted polygamy and divorce even though Genesis teaches that He designed marriage for two people as a permanent institution."

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